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Author(s): Richard N. Frye

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GEORGES DUMÉZIL AND THE TRANSLATORS OF THE AVESTA¹⁾

BY

RICHARD N. FRYE

It was the study of Sanskrit which prepared the way for the reconstruction of an Indoeuropean mother language. After the success of comparative Indoeuropean grammar in elucidating many obscure passages in ancient texts, it was only natural that someone should try to explain obscure beliefs and ideas in ancient texts by analogy with the methods of linguistics. In the fields of comparative mythology and comparative religions this is what M. Georges Dumézil, who has held the *chaire de civilisation indo-européenne* at the *Collège de France* since 1949, has tried to do. In a plethora of books and articles in the past quarter of a century Dumézil has won fervent admiration from belligerent supporters (mainly in France) and equally fervent disdain by equally belligerent opponents (mostly in England and Germany).²⁾ The acrimony which has filled the pages of learned journals regarding the theories of Dumézil is reminiscent of the traditional and characteristic sharpness of scholars in the field of Iranian Studies. But a new dimension has been added, one in which reason frequently has little voice, namely religion. It is in the hope of a certain modicum of conciliation that a few remarks are offered here, for I do believe the theories of Dumézil have something to offer towards an understanding of "Indoeuropean civilization", just as I believe they are not the all inclusive keys to this understanding.

1) This article was prepared as a public lecture. The Editors would be happy to have the opinions of other Iranian Scholars on this subject.

2) In Dumézil's latest work one can usually find references to past publications. He does not, however, repeat almost verbatim what he previously wrote, as is the habit of Franz Altheim, controversial ancient historian of the Free University of Berlin. In the words of a supporter of Dumézil, "he has compared his works to 'reports of excavations,' and has continually reviewed the results of successive 'campaigns,' retouching, making his views more precise every time he considers it necessary." G. Redard in *Kratylos*, 1 (1956), 144.

It is necessary to briefly summarize the views of Dumézil, and I hope I shall not do him an injustice in using rather wide and sweeping generalizations to characterize them. Dumézil approaches ancient religions by the study of their ideology and spirit rather than their ritual, which latter has been overemphasized of late, according to him. For Dumézil the ideology of a religion is found in its theology, mythology, sacred literature and sacerdotal organization. The Indoeuropean people, before they separated, had a "community of language". They must also have had a common ideology.

In ancient, India, Iran, and the folklore of the Ossetes, ³⁾ Dumézil found that the "ideology" of the tripartite division of society was prominent. After examination he concluded that this belief was fundamental to all of the Indoeuropean peoples and not to be found elsewhere. Further investigation showed that there was a duality within the tripartite division, and this too was accepted as a fundamental concept in the "ideology" of the Indoeuropean peoples. This is the basic premise of Dumézil, albeit with many developments and minor conclusions from this premise.

Before proceeding to the details of his duality within a tripartite division of society, let us consider if his general premise is acceptable. ⁴⁾ There is no point in accusing Dumézil of having an "intuitive" approach to this question, for many scientists have made important discoveries by intuition, and general arguments on „deduction" or "induction" as methods can hardly bring us a satisfactory conclusion. I mean one should not quibble about how Dumézil arrived at his ideas, whether from an insufficient number of texts, or late texts, or what. He has the theory; now is it cogent and does it work?

At the outset, I think one would agree that if the Indoeuropean people had a common language, they probably had a community of belief or culture, however unsophisticated it may have been. One could assume that a common environment and heredity engendered a common religion, or at least "world outlook". Just as one could speak

3) Dumézil is a specialist on Caucasian languages and folklore and has made important contributions in this field. No one denies his extraordinary linguistic ability and general competence.

4) Redard, *op. cit.*, 144, is too dogmatic when he says "In any case basically, there is no possible amendment; the Indoeuropean tripartite division is today a fact, which it would be just as foolish to deny as, for example, the correspondence of Latin *rēx*, Sanskrit *rāj-* and Irish *ri*."

of a common language, art, religion, and culture *in general terms* of the Altaic people who came to the steppes from the Siberian forests in later times, one might also speak of the civilization and culture of the Indoeuropeans so many centuries previously. But just as it is very difficult to reconstruct the ideology or religion of the ur-Altaic people who appear late in history, so it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the ideology of the ur-Indoeuropean people from later texts of daughter peoples.

To turn to archeology, theoretically, if Dumézil is right, we should see survivals of the common ideology in the art of the Scythians of Central Asia and South Russia, in the art of the earliest Indoeuropean invaders of the Near East and India, and above all in the written records left by these peoples.

The objects of material culture found in archeological excavations, have not attested to any ideology, tripartite or otherwise, among Indoeuropean peoples. Not that they should be expected to do so, but the sometimes humorous identification of many unknown objects from excavations as "cult objects" is surely more reasonable than their designation as "ideological objects". Rites and cult may have been overemphasized in the history of religions, but this does not mean that ideology is to take their place, or even to become more important. The attempt of Dumézil to find the tripartite division of Indoeuropean society pictured on a bronze of Luristan is not accepted by the majority of art historians.⁵⁾ If the tripartite division of society is as significant a feature of Indoeuropean religion as Dumézil proposes, one might well find evidence in the religious art of the Indoeuropean Kassites. It must be emphasized here that there is no *direct evidence*, written or otherwise, of Dumézil's theory, only his inferences. They may be correct, but they are not proved.

The difficulty of representing the tripartite division of society in art would seem to limit the inquiry to texts, and of these the oldest are surely the Rigveda and the Gathas. What may appear as late echoes in Rome, Ireland, or among the Slavs, must be substantiated in Iran,

5) „Dieux cassites et dieux védiques à propos d'un bronze du Louristan", *Revue Hittite et Asiatique*, (1950), 18-37. The article by R. Ghirshman, „Notes Iraniennes VIII. Le Dieu Zurvan sur les Bronzes du Luristan," *Artibus Asiae*, 21 (1958), 37-42, is as acceptable as the attempt of Altheim to find Huns in Dura Europus of the 3d cent. A.D.

but above all in India. It is the Vedic specialist who must pronounce on the validity of Dumézil's theory. For no matter how enigmatic the Rigveda may be, it is more understandable than the Gathas.⁶⁾

That ur-Indoeuropean society was divided into three groups is not improbable. The Mongols and Turks may have been divided into Khans (and shamans), aristocracy (warriors), and common people.⁷⁾ On the steppes of Central Asia and South Russia, one might expect people to be organized in some such fashion, as dictated by the necessity to survive. The question is whether this tripartite division was a, rather *the*, central feature of the "ideology" of the Indoeuropeans as opposed to other peoples. It is not too difficult to interpret words, or names of divinities, as they appear in scanty Latin, Irish, cuneiform, or other texts, as fitting into a tripartite scheme of things, but the detailed texts come from India, and secondarily from Iran. In Iran one can always blame changes, or opposed views, on the reform of Zoroaster, which one hardly can do in India. Nonetheless, the translation of the Avesta is of prime importance for Dumézil, and we should turn to that now, as well as to the details and implications of Dumézil's duality within the tripartite division.

The translation, or rather interpretation, of the Avesta is an important pillar in the structure of Dumézil's theory. He believes that the tripartite ideology was given a new emphasis and meaning by Zoroaster, who consciously, or possibly otherwise, followed the old Indoeuropean classification of the gods and society in his new doctrine of the Ameša Spentas.⁸⁾ The latter replace the old Aryan gods as the

6) One might expect some echoes of the tripartite division among the Hittites, but as far as I know none have been found.

7) J. Brough's "The Tripartite Ideology of the Indo-Europeans: An Experiment in Method," *BSOAS*, 22 (1959), 69-85, I think misses the essentials of Dumézil's arguments. Brough is right, I believe, in assuming that the tripartite division of society is unimportant as a theory. But it is just the further analyses of Dumézil on points of detail which, on the contrary, can lead to important results, if they are true. Of course, the tripartite division of things is only slightly less popular than the dichotomy, e.g. the Christian Trinity; Buddha, Dharma, and the Congregation of believers; Ahura Mazdāh, Aša, and Vohu Manah, corresponding to "good thought, word, and deed"; Ahura Mazdāh, Anāhitā, and Mithra in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II, and so forth.

8) It is principally J. Duchesne-Guillemin who not only supports Dumézil in the Iranian field, but also carries out further work in this domain on the basis of Dumézil's theories.

emanations or aspects of Ahura Mazdāh.⁹⁾ The supposed duality of the first “function” of Ahura Mazdāh, corresponding to the first priestly or governing “class”, is a parallel in India to Varuṇa and his “magical, divine” sovereignty with Mitra and his “juridical, human” sovereignty. For Zoroaster Aša “righteousness” or “truth” corresponds to Varuṇa and Vohu Manah “Good Mind”, corresponds to Mitra. According to Duchesne-Guillemin (*op. cit.*, 46) “the Ameša Spentas present themselves in their hierarchical order” in several passages in Yasna 44 and 45. In Yasna 44, stanzas 14 and 15 deal with Aša, 16 with Vohu Manah, and Yasna 17 with others of the group, a simple sequence in D.-G.’s view.

These stanzas do deal with the Ameša Spentas mentioned just above, but there is no “hierarchical” order in them. If there is a classification here it must be first believed, just as in any religion, and then it can be demonstrated. There are many difficulties which Dumézil recognizes, and Duchesne-Guillemin explains as follows (*op. cit.*, 46), “Even if we knew for certain that Zoroaster did know and adopt a hierarchy of entities reflecting the hierarchy of gods, we could hardly expect him simply to propound this system, for he must have been anxious above all to express the subordination of them all to the Wise Lord. Distinctions were thus apt to be abolished.” In other words exceptions to the functional tripartite division and double sovereignty of religion and society were to be explained as a Zoroastrian change of the original theory. Under such circumstances it is almost impossible to disprove the theories of Dumézil. In almost the same breath it is almost impossible to prove them. I say “almost”, for if one is converted anything is possible, and there is much to be said in favor of Dumézil.

First, Dumézil arrived at his theories by competent scholarship and fine Gallic reasoning, and he is supported by various able scholars in several fields. His theories are plausible. Second, and more important, he alone has a reasonable scheme or system for the Indoeuropean religion. A system is better than vague statements of “primitive beliefs” or “nature worship” as characterizations of that religion. Dumézil has no serious competitor in the field. In this case, I believe, one will have

9) The organization of the gods, of course, was merely a reflection of earthly society, or vice versa, according to Dumézil. J. Duchesne-Guillemin in his book, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* (Oxford, 1958), gives a good summary of Dumézil’s theory applied to the Iranian material.

little effect by saying of Dumézil merely "I do not believe him"; one must have an answer, another and better religion, Indoeuropean to be sure.

We observe from Dumézil that one's attitude towards the Avesta determines how one will interpret it. If one wears "functional tripartite, double sovereignty" glasses, then he will interpret the Avesta in one way. If one is a descendant of Hegel and is brought up in his school of thought as H. Lommel, then he will be influenced by a rational, Hegelian, approach to Zoroaster. It is the "order" in Dumézil's theories which has attracted Lommel to them. But Lommel, himself, adopts a "logical" or philosophical approach to the religion of Zoroaster and his writings are strong on this side, while at times weak in other matters. For W. B. Henning and his school it seems that one should understand Zoroaster as a meticulous thinker who carefully chose his words, and acted in an eminently rational manner. His language too was grammatically correct, though later corrupted, and he behaved as proper prophets should. W. Lentz, on the other hand, proposes that one should try to understand the Gathas (and perhaps the rest of the Avesta as well) by comparing them to the poems of Hafiz with several themes recurring and no great Leitmotif or continuity. This approach does have much to commend it since it is based on careful textual analysis. Certainly the Gathas, the hymns attributed to the prophet himself, are metrical like the Vedas, but a pure grammatical understanding of the Gathas is almost impossible because of the complicated syntax. More is required than mere grammatical analyses.

Nonetheless, the first and basic step to an understanding of the Gathas, and the rest of the Avesta, is a solid grammatical foundation. The recent translation of the Gathas by Humbach is a fine example of grammatical analysis at its best.¹⁰⁾ Yet one can read the translation without realizing that the book is a religious classic, the utterances of an inspired prophet. For it is difficult to believe that Zoroaster was not an inspired prophet. He was surely neither a politician nor a "Jung-

10) H. Humbach, *Die Gathas des Zarathustra* (Heidelberg, 1959), 2 vols.

Individual studies on words, or special problems, have appeared in the *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft*.

Although one may quarrel with certain details of interpretation this is the best translation of the Gathas we have.

grammatiker". W. Hinz's emphasis on the importance of allegory and even parables in the Avesta, with the reminder that common religious aspirations should not be forgotten in assessing the Avesta, is interesting but hardly more.

There is always the danger in Avestan studies of seizing upon a device or a theory as the key to the understanding of that enigmatic book to the exclusion of all contrary evidence (which is declared corrupt and untrustworthy), proclaiming that the true meaning of the Avesta lies in this key. Johannes Hertel is the shining example of a competent Indo-Iranian philologist who proposed his *Feuerlehre* as the key to the understanding of both the Avesta and the Vedas. His ubiquitous fire was not taken seriously by others but his linguistic skill in support of fire was impressive. Just as Th. Noeldeke said of Pahlavi, "In Pehlewi stumpfen wir alle", so the Avesta may drive all who study it slightly mad.

I believe that Zoroaster was a traditional priest, an *Opferpriester* or Vedic *hotar*, but he profoundly changed his beliefs. The god Ahura Mazdāh as the companion or partner of Zoroaster, with whom he converses, is something new. His hymns are like the Rigvedic hymns in form but their contents are different. His new religion concentrates on prayer, not on the sacrifices together with hymns as in the Vedas. The Gathas themselves are the offerings to Ahura Mazdah, hymns of a prophet, not of a careful person who weighs the political or social implications of his words and changes them accordingly.

I doubt very much if Zoroaster left a church after him, but he certainly must have impressed the people to whom he preached. How they organized, how they passed on his message to their children, we do not know. It is doubtful whether an organized "church" as we know it in late Sassanian times existed in the Achaemenian period. We cannot say whether Zoroaster received any ideas from the West, from the Medes, but it is not impossible.

The relation of Zoroaster to the tribe of the Medes called Magi is unknown, but a not unreasonable assumption is that both deviated from the Indo-Iranian norm of religion as exemplified in the Vedas. The Magi were probably influenced by the beliefs and rites of their civilized neighbors in Mesopotamia, while Zoroaster was a prophet with his own beliefs. On the other hand, I doubt whether the Magi abandoned the old Aryan pantheon. An important problem, among the host

of problems engendered by Zoroaster, is the difference between the Gathas and the rest of the Avesta in content as well as in language. Gershevitch has recently sought to explain this difference by gathering together more loose threads than any of his predecessors.¹¹⁾ He borrowed an idea of Lommel that one must distinguish between Zarathuštrianism, the teachings of Zoroaster as contained in the Gathas, and Zoroastrianism, the later religion which is Zarathuštrianism, plus "the cult of certain non-Zarathuštrian divinities who are either (a) an Indo-Iranian inheritance, since they have equivalents in the Vedas (e.g. Mithra, Haoma, etc.), or (b) have no counterpart in the Vedas, and may therefore be considered peculiarly Iranian (e.g. Anāhitā, Drvāspā, the hypostasis of fortune [Xvarənah-], etc.)"; and certain Zarathuštrian notions (e.g. *aši-*, *sraoša-*) recast as divinities on the pattern of the non-Zarathuštrian divinities.

The fact that some of the later Avesta is incompatible with the Gathas usually has been explained as the attempt of priests to reconcile and bring into the fold of Zoroaster various cults and communities which worshipped Mithra, Anāhitā, and other deities. Gershevitch proposes a new theory, that the Zarathuštrian priests are the authors of the texts of the later Avesta but they are not the authors of the religious mixture which the texts reflect. "Their task was merely to compose texts for an existing mixed religion, whose character it was beyond their power, or wish, to alter. This task of 'codification' was undertaken by Zarathuštrian priests because they alone had the skill to do so, having been brought up in the highly developed literary tradition which we first meet in Zarathuštra's poems" (*op. cit.*, 14). Gershevitch continues to elaborate the religious situation of ancient Iran after the death of the prophet. The Magi were a "clergy of all denominations, a class of professional priests who officiated in the service of several if not all forms of Iranian worship that were practised in Western Iran" (p. 17). On the other hand in the East "up to a certain time, an eclectic non-Zarathuštrian priesthood may have performed a part similar to, but less prominent than, that of the Magi in the West, while the Zarathuštrian priests served Ahura Mazdāh exclusively; later the Zarathuštrian priests monopolized the priestly

11) I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* (Cambridge, 1959) 357 pp., especially 13-22.

profession by becoming 'Zoroastrian.'" Darius introduced Ahura Mazdāh, presumably a creation of the prophet, into Persis and the Magi took over the service of this god as well as others. Ahura Mazdāh was returned to Aryana Vaējah, the homeland of the Aryans and identified with greater Chorasmia, as *primus inter pares*, probably under Artaxerxes I. The 'Zoroastrian' Calendar introduced in the Achaemenid Empire about 441 B.C., a reflexion of the compound 'Zoroastrian' religion, was composed in Persis and then by royal decree was spread throughout the empire. The Zarathuštrian priests in Aryana Vaējah, seeing the writing on the wall, "had the inspiration of turning the religious mixture they saw had received official sanction into the mixed religion we call Zoroastrianism, by supplying it with a scripture composed in the language of Zarathuštra as spoken in their days" (p. 20). The Magi had θεογόναι probably recited in an archaic Median language, understood by only a few worshippers. "The history of early Zoroastrianism can now be seen as a give-and-take game played by the Zarathuštrian priesthood of Aryana Vaējah on the one hand and the Magi on the other" (p. 21). Thus by a clever move the eastern priests had saved their position by producing scriptures of the mixture composed by the Magi. But the latter had another card up their sleeves. Now that the prophet was fading into legendary antiquity, they declared Zarathuštra to have been a Magus, and that they were the true heirs and custodians of his doctrine, and Zoroaster was moved west to Media as later tradition reports it.

Gershevitch's theory is an important advance in Avestan studies for it represents a logical and technically competent "break-through" in the maze of problems surrounding Zoroaster and his religion after his death. I believe it will not only stimulate new ideas, but will also raise standards in this field by clearing much underbrush of enigmatic facts and faulty theories. I personally believe that of all theories presented to explain this early period Gershevitch's is the most acceptable, mainly because he seeks to explain all the relevant and often conflicting facts. There are, however, several questions which I should like to raise regarding the elaborate, but reasonable, structure of Gershevitch's theory.

First, I am not so certain that *only* the Zarathuštrian priests were qualified to compose hymns in the Avestan language. Granted that the language of the Gathas and its younger descendant in the rest of the

Avesta are eastern Iranian dialects, then one must also include the later parts of the Younger Avesta, some of which, especially the Vendidad, show distinct Magian influence (p. 22, note). This implies that western Magi could compose in the sacred tongue, if later why not earlier as well? Aryana Vaējah was the homeland of the Iranians, why not in religion as well as legend? In other words there is a strong possibility that Zoroaster departs from a norm of Iranian religion already widespread among the Iranian peoples in the West as well as the East. I wonder whether the theogonies to Mithra in western Iran were different in language and content from those of eastern Iran. I am not at all sure that the Magi had theogonies recited in archaic Median understood by only a few worshippers, while Zoroaster in the East used a Gathic tongue understood by the inhabitants of Aryana Vaējah.¹²⁾ While less than a century and a half later the Zarathuštrian priests had the brilliant idea of composing hymns to Mithra, Anāhitā, and other deities in a tongue understood by all of the local inhabitants, which feat sealed the fate of the non-Zarathuštrian priests, who presumably still used archaic Avestan (Gathic?).¹³⁾ This is difficult to follow since there are too many imponderables, and too much emphasis on language.

Second, I feel the long and colorful struggle between the Magi and the Zarathuštrian priests is an unnecessary assumption. The Iranian tribes probably had basically the same religion, or religions if you will, in East as well as West before Zoroaster. It is further probable that priests (*zaotar*, Vedic *hotar*), existed as a group or class among all the Iranian tribes. I suspect that the sacrificial hymns of the priests in all the tribes were much the same, and probably in the same language. This language would be the tongue of the Iranian homeland in the East. (Possibly theogonies were sung in archaic Median, archaic Old Persian, etc. but in such a case the contents would be much the same every-

12) Or does G. mean that Zoroaster's Gathic was just like the archaic Avestan language of the non-Zarathuštrian priests which their followers could not understand? (p. 20). This is somewhat „künstlich“.

13) *Op. cit.*, 21. The reasoning here is difficult to follow. Does G. mean: 1) the non-Zarathuštrian priests held services in archaic Avestan, or 2) Zoroaster used Gathic which was intelligible to the inhabitants but was not the same as archaic Avestan (or was it?) Then later 1) the non Zarathuštrian priests continued to use archaic Avestan but, 2) the Zarathuštrian priests defeated them (1) by using the younger Avestan language which everyone knew?

where.) The Medes and Persians in the West may have been influenced in their religious practices by the indigenous peoples (Elamites and others) and by Babylonians and Assyrians. This may have changed the character of the priests, the Magi among the Medes, but the basic principles of the religion would remain.

I should like to propose another theory. While the Iranians of the West are entering history with new empires and cultures, Zoroaster appears in the East, in the homeland to preach a reform of the old religion. This he does in Gathic, perhaps not widely understood. Conversions are made and after the prophet's death his work is continued. But many people, among them priests and Magi, both in east and west accepted Zoroaster's Ahura Mazdāh only as *primus inter pares*. Darius, a remarkable man in many ways, accepts the message of Zoroaster and gives Ahura Mazdāh the place he will not lose until the Arabs conquer Iran. Ahura Mazdāh was *the* god of the Achaemenids as Aššur was of the Assyrian kings. That many non-Zarathuštrian Iranians thought the prophet's *mazdāh ahura* was their god **Vouruna*, as Gershevitch suggests, is reasonable.¹⁴⁾

I think the Magi, or the priesthood of western Iran under the Achaemenids, were responsible for Zoroastrianism in scripture as well as content, for their "theogonies" were probably not in old Median, or old Persian, but in an eastern "homeland" dialect. Zoroaster was recognized as a great prophet, but ahead of his time. Later, under the Sassanians, in another age with another Zeitgeist, the "monotheism" of Zoroaster was re-emphasized. My reasons for this position would occupy more space than is available here. As the Greeks said that we make our gods in our own image, so we interpret the Avesta and Zoroaster in the light of our training and beliefs.

14) *Op. cit.*, 47.